DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 855 CS 208 805

AUTHOR Comprone, Joseph J.
TITLE Literary Theory and Composition: Creating Communities of Readers and Writers.
PUB DATE Mar 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (36th, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Observation Techniques; *Content Area Writing; Higher Education; Learning Theories; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; Oral Interpretation; Researchers; *Student Reaction; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Improvement; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Literary Theory; *Reading Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

A theory of interpretation developed from the composition scholar's reading and revision of literary theory can effectively serve as a core theory in writing across the curriculum programs. For example, recent composition theory, with its emphasis on close study of students' texts and the process of their writing, provides the writing teacher with the practical means of decomposing student writing so that students' half-formed and half-expressed intentions can be mapped on to later drafts, or so that they can become the subject of new writings altogether. Further, the emphasis on using writing as a means of discovering and clarifying ideas is the writing teacher's way of acknowledging the literary theorist's attention to psychological and social transformation through literary language. In addition, the methods of composition researchers who have systematically studied classroom methods and student responses and performance can add an empirical methodological dimension to literary theory that it now lacks. Writing theorists, through literary theory, can come to understand writing as a means to the greater end of interpretation. Literary theorists, with the help of writing theory, can come to understand the place writing has in the context of interpretation. Such a reconceptualization will help content area teachers see writing as an act in a unified, interpretative event. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Joseph J. Comprone

ED254855

Literary Theory and Composition: Creating Communities of Readers and Writers

I

This paper does what Mina Shaughnessy suggested that basic writers should not do: it presents a record of an idea developing. Gary Tate last spring asked me either to add a postscript, revise, or write a new essay for the next edition of Teaching Composition, Ten Bibliographical Essays, due for a second edition in 1986. My contribution to the first edition had been an essay on the uses of the media in the teaching of writing. Since then, my own research has moved in the direction of reading theory, the uses of literature in the teaching of writing, and to considerations of literature and composition. I still see the use of contrasting media as central to effective teaching in this newly-integrated area of literature and composition, especially when the two are contextualized by writing across the curriculum. But, before we as professionals can turn to the problems of effective delivery within a cross-disciplinary program, we must find and articulate coherent base theories. Otherwise, we move across the curriculum in an intellectual vacuum. Teachers of writing, without theory, teach writing to students who know the content of the course better than their teachers do. And, without theory, they often respond with a mechanical vengeance to the threats posed by more knowledgeable or equally ignorant students, relying on artificial methodologies and mechanical formats as replacements for the rhetorical foundations and interpretive functions of the older, English department versions of the compostition course.

CS 208 805

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Joseph J. Comprone

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The problems of curricular reform, combined with my more recent research interests--in fact, curricular interests have always motivated my research, rather than the other way around--led me to ask Gary Tate if I might substitute an essay on literary theory, media, and composition for my original piece. So here I am, explaining to you how I plan to organize this new essay at this point in my research and reading.

Before I go on, though, I should explain that my motives in writing about literary theory and composition are political as well as scholarly. I believe that the current interest in writing across the curriculum is at a kind of moral crossroads. It could be a negative moral force on the teaching of writing by becoming the university's newest in a long-line of reductive responses to what some people see as a back-to-the-basics movement. As back-to-basics, writing across the curriculum places the writing teacher in the role of super-cop, policing the punctuation, spelling, documentation, and use of mechanical formats of students from all the disciplines. Writing course content would be separated from writing process; the methods and knowledge of other disciplines would simply be neatly written down under the supervision of a writing instructor, or <u>adjunct,</u> who, preferably, would know as little about the paper's content as the ignorant freshmen, and certainly would know less than the discipline major.

Writing across the curriculum can be a positive moral force only if this debilitatingly reductive position is overcome by positions of some intellectual content. And this is where literary theory enters the picture. Only when we are able, as planners of writing curriculum, to find

and articulate key theories upon which to base our courses and programs will we effectively combat reductionist programs. In this paper, I shall argue that a theory of interpretation developed from the composition scholar's reading and revision of literary theory could effectively serve as a core theory in writing across the curriculum programs.

This political aside leads me round-about to the purpose of this paper. I shall explain the organizational plan I have in mind for the essay I am writing for the new Ten Bibliographical Essays. This plan will focus upon possible connections between recent composition research and literary theory, and it will turn these connections into an argument for making a general theory of interpretation the central idea behind cross-disciplinary writing programs.

II

My first task will be one of condensation. As teachers of writing we must have a clear and workable idea of the major patterns of thought in current literary theory before we can proceed to relate those patterns to current composition research. We need not engage in the polemics that often are representative of the arguments among literary theorists themselves simply because as teachers of writing we should be more on the look-out for perspectives on composing interpretations than we are on the look-out for right answers to the questions posed either by individual texts or generic controversies. In some recent work of my own, I have proposed a framework that allows for such condensation of recent perspectives on literary theory. These frameworks condense without artificializing.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Before considering the frame itself I shall refer to Gerald Prince for a definition of literary theory: "Literary theory attempts to illuminate in explicit and systematic ways the set of norms, conventions, and rules that make literature possible and intelligible." Literary theorists ask generic, historical, and contextual questions; they avoid questions of explication and specific interpretation. But composition teachers using literary theory can ill afford such purity of intention. They must take what literary theorists produce and fit it into a general theory of interpretive writing in which general questions of community and context work side-by-side with specific responses to texts.

Now I shall return to the framework of perspectives drawn from literary theory. Each of the categories in this framework derives from the persectives theorists within the category have taken on the process or act of interpretation. Subjective theorists focus upon the person doing the interpretation: the actual or implied reader of a text or community, the student reader in a classroom community, or more generally the implied or ideal reader as a functioning member of what Stanley Fish calls an "interpretive community." David Bleich and Norman Holland represent two very different traditions of subjective theory.

Objective theorists emphasize either the text as object or artifact, as in new criticism and its permutations, or the interpretive process itself as an objective system of inquiry in which the author's intention is recoverable by following systematic hermeneutic methods. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., whom I recently heard Norman Holland refer to as the Jerry Falwell of literary theory, falls squarely into the objective perspective.

Transactional theorists emphasize the interaction of text, reader, and author within the interpretive context. Louise Rosenblatt's work in Education and Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological reading theory best represent the transactional perspective. This paper will not explore in any detail the various arguments and disagreements put forth by the proponents of these various perspectives. Rather, it will explore the implications of each perspective as it might be used by writing teachers as they construct a general theory of interpretation.

Two central concepts wind their way through all these perspectives. The first is interdependencey. No matter how dogmatic the theory that is being proposed, all literary theorists give at least some attention to the interaction of readers, authors, and texts within interpretive communities. There is a biological quality to the treatment of these reader-author-text interactions. Just as specialized cells in the simplest living organisms depend on one another in complex networks of relationships, so the readers, authors, and texts that comprise an interpretive community live together in an interconnected whole that the critic-reader is barred by literary theorists from reducing to any of its parts. Readers, Roland Barthes tells us, make and play with texts, perhaps as much or more than writers do. And texts, Derrida suggests, are more than tools in the game of literature; they are living things, influencing our collective senses of self and other. They make us who we are as we read and reside in interpretive communities.

The second central term is interpretive community. To all literary theorists, however objective, subjective, or transactional in their

orientations, the true author of a literary text or experience is the community of readers and writers who produce and respond to that text. Interpretive communities, from the perspective of literary theorists, are macro-organisms, complexly-structured networks of people who identify with the "norms, conventions, and rules that make literature possible and intelligible." Kenneth Burke's theory of identification as simultaneously a sharing and a recognition of difference is important to keep in mind here because ideal readers are able to share norms as they make original applications of them. Reading and writing encourage mutuality while they accentuate difference, or <u>differance,</u> as the deconstructionist would put it. The more traditional concept of a rhetorical community composed of an immediate and universal audience or readership simply cannot match up in complexity with the literary theorist's concept of interdependency within an interpretive community. The rhetorical model reduces interpretation to a set of mechanical relationships within a literary version of the communication triad of speaker, subject, and audience. Literary theory talks instead of cognitive styroscopy, the kind of dual vision in which the interpreter sees the community as author, the reader as writer, and the text as a builder's blueprint.

No discussion of literary theory, no matter how condensed, can afford to omit the concept of deconstruction. As we read, the deconstructionists tell us, we are taking apart as much as we are putting together. As reading selves we are <u>intersubjective,</u> in other words, we compose images of ourselves as readers from the other readers we imagine as we read. We exchange roles, change places, and remain ourselves, through

the act of reading. Our responses, reader-response theorists tell us, are interdependently social and personal, collective and individual. Readers who author "Mending Wall" must simultaneously be Frost's narrator and Frost, and they must be the old-stone-savage as well. Only readers prepared to play by the rules of an interpretive community that knows dramatic-lyric poetry can derive literary meaning from, can truly be authors of "Mending Wall."

To the literary theorists, the terms intersubjective and intertextual are parallel in meaning, but they apply to different planes of interpretation. This idea brings us back to the framework of perspectives as they actually work within the process of interpretation. Deconstruction occurs when the subjective perspective transacts with the objective, when the reader's private, psychological self--which is, in turn, a social collection of community influences and human instincts--moves into and around the text's communal self--which, in turn, moves into and around the private and psychological self. Rigid stratification within a subjective or objective perspective is by definition reductive when it is applied to general processes of interpretation. Reading and writing are best understood as symbolic actions; as symbolic actions, they are inherently communal in that the self and other are never isolated from one another. They decompose as they are composed.

III

Most important to my purpose in this paper is the question of how these concepts drawn from literary theory connect with the implications of current composition theory. Time constraints force me to summarize; I

shall put these connenctions in the form of a condensed list. Each item on the list will be spelled out in more detail in my new essay for the second edition of the Tate bibliography.

1. In S/Z and the Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes defines a writerly text as one that has what communication theorists call "good continuation" or flow; the eyes move down the page without regression, to use psycholinguistic lingo. A readerly text, for Barthes, does not flow so easily. It catches the reader up in frictions; the frictions, in turn, produce deconstructions that the reader must then re-compose. Certainly composition teachers have long known both the pleasure and frustration of de-composing and re-composing what previously had been seen as the flawed texts of student writers. Perhaps, the deconstructionist suggests, at one level of meaning or another, all written texts are flawed. Recent composition theory, with its emphasis on close study of student texts and the process of their composition, provides the writing teacher with the practical means of decomposing student writing so that students' half-formed and half-expressed intentions can be mapped on to later drafts, or so that they can become the subject of new writings altogether. The sacredness of the mechanics of written texts then receives less emphasis and the use of writing-reading as an act of generating meaning in the ongoing conversation of a literary community becomes the teacher's and the student's primary aim. The pleasure of play, the friction of creation and decomposition, to use Barthes emphases, then become the compositon course's essential strategies.

2. The last decade has also seen composition research turn to a closer study of revision and drafting. Certainly this emphasis on using writing as a means of discovering and clarifying ideas as they develop in stages, from what Kenneth Burke would call incipient to symbolic acts, is the writing teacher's way of acknowledging the literary theorist's attention to psychological and social transformation through literary language. The subjective, objective, and transactional perspectives or frames of the literary theorist become, within this composition context, different but related ways of gauging the personal, textual, and interactive influences on a draft as it is turned by writer, reader, and classroom community into yet another draft.

3. Recent composition research on invention and arrangement as they are circumscribed by the discovery of form during the process of writing ties in with literary theory's recent emphasis on rhetoric as a core discipline in the arts and sciences. This re-discovery of rhetoric, however, is not a re-enactment of the tradition of what Kennedy calls technical rhetoric, or what some rhetoricians would call the "ornamental" tradition of figures and tropes. Rather it is a re-establishment of the Greek philosophical tradition, with its emphasis on Socratic dialectical play and Aristotelian formal properties. Rhetoric becomes for the writing teacher, with the re-establishment of philosophical rhetoric, a means of seeing all verbal action as one form or another of persuasion and identification. It re-establishes the need that Wayne Booth articulated in Modern Dogma

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

and the Rhetoric of Assent for a means of arguing probabilities in a social cotext that often seems to value only scientific certainties. The discovery of form, organically-conceived, thus becomes the ultimate aim of any serious discourser. The message be damned because the message is contained in the form. Again, it is the interpretive community that circumscribes this search for form, but the community's norms and conventions simply provide the tools for the imaginative writer--and all writers are imaginative in this sense--while the writer's internalized sense of readers and texts shape the text itself.

4. Pedagogical theory and classroom research have always had a place in composition studies, but only recently has the classroom become a viable object of theory and research in literary studies. Both David Bleich and Norman Holland have written of their applications of subjective theory to the classroom and to student case studies; Stanley Fish's work on interpretive communities often refers to the classroom as the ideal training ground for potential members of literary intepretive communities. Even objective theorists such as E. D. Hirsch sometimes base their interpretive systems on needs that are most apparent in the classroom: Hirsch, for example, bases much of his Validity in Interpretation on a need to explain to students in literature courses that interpretation is not relativistic, that there is a method behind the seemingly mysterious process of finding meaning in literary texts. The methods of composition researchers who have systematically studied classroom methods and student responses and performance can add an empirical-methodological dimension to literary

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

theory that it now lacks. Bleich's emphasis on written response and meaning statements within the ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of a literary work within a classroom community and Holland's concept of a student-reader's identity as dependent on the interaction of the psychological and social dimensions of response to a text within a classroom community require the precise touch of the researcher in writing processes to give them substance and support.

5. Finally, that composition buzzword process is really no more or less than the composition theorist's metaphor for what Anne Berthoff calls "thinking about thinking," or what many literary theorists describe as "metalanguage." Literary theory conceives of the intersubjectivity of reading and writing in two ways: in what Jonathan Culler terms "literary competence," and in what Roland Barthes and scholars such as Richard Rorty describes as "optional descriptions" (p. 379). Nothing, Rorty contends, is ever really learned unless we, as interpreters, see the relations of different kinds of discourse within a strand of one, ongoing conversation. It is the knowledge of language within us, and the norms and conventions shared by a literary community that create our literary competence, Culler argues. But it is only when this competence becomes an ongoing, constantly revised, and extra-contextual interpretive conversation that language reaches its ultimate process orientation. Writing theorists, through literary theory, come to understand writing as a means to the greater end of interpretation. Literary theorists, with the help of writing theory, come to understand the place writing has in the context of interpretation.

IV

Interpretation will be my key term in this forthcoming essay, and the essential purpose behind my essay will be political rather than scholarly. I simply do not want us moving across a curriculum in a vacuum. Interpretation, what Thomas Whitaker in the recent ADE Profession 84 called "conversation as design," is at the center of what we do when we teach writing, whatever the discipline:

> If we don't want simply to capitulate to the crudest assumptions of the marketplace, we'll have to reinterpret, together with our fellow citizens, what it should mean for us to be teachers of interpetation (p. 1).

Literary theory gives us the opportunity to rethink the complex relationship between reading--thinking--writing--interpreting--seeing--speaking--hearing. This reconceptualization will help us see writing and reading as acts in a unified, interpretive event, and it will help us, as well, to know our mission as we carry this organic theory of reading--writing--interpretation into other disciplines, where the threats of overspecialization, jargon, obfuscation, and over-refined professional audiences will always be with us.

Joseph J. Comprone
University of Louisville

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. S/Z. tr. Richard Miler. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

_____. The Pleasure of the Text. tr. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1973.

Bleich, David. Subjective Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

_____. Readings and Feelings. Urbana, Il.: NCTE, 1978.

Booth, Wayne C. Critical Understanding. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979.

_____. Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent. South Bend: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1973.

Burke, Kenneth. A Grammar of Motives. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969.

Comprone, Joseph J. "Literature and the Writing Process: A Pedagogical Reading of William Faulkner's 'Barn Burning'." College Literature. 9(1982): 1-21.

_____. "Burke's Dramatism as a Means of Using Literature to Teach Composition." Rhetoric Society Quarterly. 9 (1979): 142-155.

Culler, Jonathan. Structuralist Poetics. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975.

_____. The Pursuit of Signs. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.

_____. On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.

Fish, Stanley. Is There a Text in This Class? Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.

_____. Self-Consuming Artifacts. Berkeley: U of California P, 1972.

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. Validity in Interpretation. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.

_____. "Cultural Literacy." The American Scholar. Spring (1983): 159-169.

Holland, Norman. 5 Readers Reading. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.

_____. The Dynamics of Literary Response. New York: Norton, 1975.

Iser, Wolfgang. The Act of Reading. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1978.

_____. The Implied Reader. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.

Kennedy, George. Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980.

Prince, Gerald. "Literary Theory and the Undergraduate Curriculum." Profession 84. Modern Language Assn. (1984): 37-40.

Rorty, Richard. Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979.

Rosenblatt, Louise. Literature as Exploration. rev. ed. New York: Noble and Noble, 1968.

_____. The Reader The Text The Poem. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978.

Smith, Frank. Understanding Reading. 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1978.

Sudol, Ronald, ed. Revising. Urbana: NCTE, 1982.

Tate, Gary, ed. Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1976.

Whitaker, Thomas. "Conversation as Design." Profession 84. Modern Language Assn. (1984): 1-4.

Winterowd, W. Ross. "Form." Contemporary Rhetoric. Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975: 163-171.